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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000031

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SUBJECT: FIS WRITES TO AMBASSADOR AND RAISES STREET PROFILE

REF: ALGIERS 18

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b), (c) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Ali Benhadj, vice-president and spiritual leader of the disbanded and outlawed Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), wrote a letter to the Ambassador in which he advised the United States to revise its support of Israel in the wake of the current situation in Gaza, and in which he decried the Algerian government's refusal to allow public marches on the Embassy. More important than the content of the letter is the fact that Benhadj is using the situation in Gaza as a platform to foment anger toward the Algerian government by railing against what many Algerians have seen as a lackluster reaction to the crisis, and against the government's limitations on freedom of expression. The government has since allowed demonstrations in support of the people of Gaza, but die-hards like Benhadj may be able to sway discontented Algerians to a more stringent Islamic viewpoint as the Gaza situation continues, and should it worsen in the eyes of sympathetic Algerians. Benhadj was swept up from the Embassy's outer entrance by plainclothes security agents within minutes of his arrival to deliver the letter to the Ambassador on January 6, but it was sent to the Ambassador the following day via an email account in the UK. The London-based email address is linked to three active terrorism cases in the U.S.. (We are sending an English translation of Benhadj's full letter to NEA/MAG.) END SUMMARY.

ALI BENHADJ RETURNS TO THE EMBASSY, BRIEFLY

12. (C) Ali Benhadj was dropped off in front of the Embassy the afternoon of January 6 and attempted to deliver his letter, but was whisked away by plainclothes security agents within two minutes of his arrival. Benhadj tried to do the same thing last year and met a similar fate, though was able on that occasion to deliver his text. Although the police told us January 6 they would provide a copy of the letter, they have not yet done so. We obtained a copy on January 8 from a contact at Arabies magazine, who could not say if or when the letter might be published (to our knowledge the letter has not yet been published in Algeria). The Ambassador also received a copy of the Arabic-language letter on January 7 as an attachment to an email sent to his official unclassified account from an email account that appears to be based in London. The email address is linked to three terrorism cases under investigation by the FBI.

USING U.S. HISTORY TO TEACH US A LESSON

13. (C) Benhadj's letter first rails against the Algerian

government for refusing to allow a march on the Embassy to protest Israel's actions in Gaza. It then urges the U.S. to change its position supporting Israel, and to stop referring to Hamas as a terrorist organization. Benhadj refers to U.S. history and asks if the American war for independence would not have been considered terrorism by the standards the USG now applies to Hamas, which the letter refers to repeatedly as a "liberation movement." He quotes Thomas Jefferson, "Henry David" (presumably Thoreau) and the Declaration of Independence on armed rebellion, civil disobedience, and the overthrow of tyranny and colonization, and argues that the United States is hypocritical in embracing its "political-revolutionary" history and principles upon which the Constitution was founded, but branding Hamas and "resistance movements" like it as terrorists.

14. (C) Benhadj goes on to describe the Algerian people as revolutionary by nature and tending to support the oppressed peoples of the world. He characterizes Israel's actions in Gaza as a "massacre" and crimes against humanity, subject to sanction under international law. The United States, he writes, is complicit in its political and military support of Israel through weapons sales and our use of veto power on the UN Security Council. He pleads that the current or next American administration revise its policies regarding Israel in order to preserve its place in history and its reputation in the Arab and Islamic world, because the country's interests may otherwise face danger from just regimes, particularly those who triumph the Palestinian cause, or from people who seek justice but who are subject to immoral governments. Benhadj concludes by imploring the United

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States to pressure Israel to stop its "fascist aggression" against Gaza before it reaches "the point of no return, at which moment, your regrets will be insufficient."

ANTICS, OR RAISING THE ISLAMIC PROFILE?

15. (C) Benhadj signed his letter as vice president of the disbanded and outlawed FIS, and has been using the Gaza situation as a platform to foment public anger toward the Algerian government and its perceived lackluster response to the crisis (reftel). He has been arrested several times since December 28 in highly publicized incidents, and he has issued public statements blasting Arab governments for their passivity toward the crisis. His activities have not only been reported in Algerian press and on Al-Jazeera television, but at least one of his speeches has been posted on YouTube.

16. (C) On January 2, Benhadj took the floor of the Hai el Badr mosque in the Algiers district of Kouba after the Friday sermon and rallied congregants to give extra alms to the Palestinian cause. He was arrested outside the mosque as he attempted to lead a march on the Presidency, which, according to his letter, would have allowed the group to also demonstrate at the Embassy (the Embassy lies between the Hai el Badr mosque and the Presidency). He was released several hours later, but arrested again the following day for attempting to march on the Egyptian embassy, and the day after that when he attempted to confront the former minister and ruling FLN party leader Abdelaziz Belkhadem. He appeared on Al-Jazeera later that day denouncing his arrest and what he called "Arab hypocrisy." On January 7 he stole the show at a Gaza rally called by the Workers Party (PT) at which the PT leader and possible presidential candidate, Louisa Hanoune, did not appear. He was arrested on January 8 after he spoke at a gathering in a movie theater organized by the opposition Islamist party, Islah, and again on July 9 after appearing with other FIS leaders in central Algiers at a government-sanctioned demonstration at which he was accused of inciting violence.

COMMENT

17. (C) Benhadj may be a relic of an old Islamist political movement, but there remains among some Algerians a lingering nostalgia for the pre-civil war messages of the FIS. On January 9, the government allowed public demonstrations for the first time since 2001 (septel) and officials have been taking more vocal stances against Israeli actions in Gaza. But these efforts may not be enough quell the anger felt by a segment of the Algerian population who deeply sympathize with the Palestinians of Gaza, as evidenced by the number of people injured and arrested in clashes with police during the legal demonstrations (50 demonstrators and 30 police were reported injured in a clash in the Kouba section of Algiers).

Thousands are taking to the streets across Algeria, and support for the Palestinians in the form of cash alms, blood drives and other acts of solidarity is increasing daily. After having served 12 years in prison, Benhadj has a tacit understanding with police that when he acts out in public they will detain him, but never hold him in custody very long. Given the mounting frustration most Algerians feel regarding the situation in Gaza, his message and that of other Islamists (including a newly formed Islamist political party, septel) will continue to resonate with the significant segment of the population who also feel disaffected and disillusioned with the current government.

PEARCE